

Living Water Community Church's Nepali Ministry Story

Living Water Community Church has been a multi-cultural congregation from its beginnings as a church plant from Reba Place Church in the early 1990's. Cambodian members of Reba Place Church, who had emigrated to the U.S. as refugees in the late '70s and early '80s, mainly lived in Chicago. When efforts began to plan a church in Chicago, the Cambodian group were among the founding members of LWCC. Most of these members are established and have raised families in the U.S. One of our Cambodian members has been licensed and ordained to the ministry by Illinois Mennonite Conference, and had substantial involvements with ministries in Cambodia as well as Chicago for more than ten years.

For more than a decade, LWCC has been blessed to receive several new groups of refugees into our congregation. These include Bhutanese-Nepali and Africans from a variety of countries and ethnic and language groups. Currently, we worship regularly with six different language groups. LWCC has been seeking ways to adequately receive, support, include, and communicate with these very diverse groups of people. Through the leadership of several of our members who work with refugee resettlement agencies, congregational members were trained to accompany individuals and families in their settling into Rogers Park and the U.S. Congregational leadership works continually at devising translation strategies, pastoral care resources, and discipling and fellowship activities which are culturally appropriate for the various groups within the congregation. Presently, the LWCC pastoral team consists of leaders representing three main language groups: English, Nepalese and Swahili. Additionally, LWCC has collaborated with other organizations in the neighborhood to provide ESL, counseling, census collection, and other services to the variety of refugee populations.

In 2008, Bhutanese-Nepali refugees began resettling in Rogers Park, Chicago. Leaders of the Church responded with mutual aid, home visits, and Bible study. One year later, Amos Shakya, a Nepali Campus Minister with Youth With a Mission (YWAM), moved to the neighborhood with the explicit mission call to make known the Good News among these new arrivals. He was invited to assume the position of Lay Pastoral Leader with LWCC. His primary responsibilities included Bible instruction, evangelism, mentoring and faith discipleship among the Bhutanese-Nepali refugees in Rogers Park. Amos partnered with LWCC congregants to establish house fellowship meetings that had the effect of integrating the Bhutanese-Nepali across caste lines. These fellowship meetings included worship and teaching, but, equally important, hospitality and meals. Believers from different castes shared food with one another.

In 2010, Amos transitioned to the position of Church Community Worker at LWCC in a salaried position (funded in partnership with Mennonite Central Committee) for outreach and pastoring recently-arrived Bhutanese/Nepali refugees. Over the next several years, the congregation of Bhutanese-Nepali brothers and sisters grew steadily and, in addition to the continuation of weekly fellowship and prayer meetings, began formal services at the LWCC meetinghouse. This congregation of 50-70 regular Sunday worshippers became an integral part of the LWCC community. Amos worked steadfastly in gift discernment and equipping among these new believers to anoint leaders in worship, prayer, music, home visits, and youth. To his credit, he focused on discipleship of youth to assume some of these critical positions. In 2015, Pastor Shakya graduated from the Journey Leadership Development Program sponsored by the

Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. Soon thereafter, he and his wife, Roma, began a church plant in St. Charles, at the invitation of a LWCC Nepali member who had moved there. The church plant has grown to include 15-20 families and Amos and Roma have moved to St. Charles to dedicate themselves full-time to developing the church.

Providentially, Pastor Olak Sunuwar arrived in Chicago on August 2014 from Hong Kong for PhD study at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. His original plan was to go to Luther Seminary in Minnesota but the PhD program was cancelled because of the seminary's financial situation, and he was instead admitted in the Lutheran School of Theology seminary in Chicago. This appeared to be God's perfect plan to direct him to Chicago ministry, just as Pastor Amos was needed to care for his daughter Yaronia undergoing heart transplant treatment while his wife Roma was working and studying. Looking for a Nepali church, Pastor Olak arrived at LWCC. He already had ministry experiences in Nepal since 2005 as a theological teacher at the Himalayan Bible School, church planting trainer, preacher and worship leader in his church. He later worked among immigrants and refugees in Hong Kong, and served as a director of the Nepalese Church Council in Hong Kong to equip Nepalese pastors and leaders and to unite churches. He quickly discerned the need of leadership development within the Nepali congregation at LWCC. Pastor Amos and Roma were so happy to receive Pastor Olak into the community and recognize his ability to support the Nepali congregation through his gifts.

Pastor Olak began preaching, teaching, conducting baptism classes, pre-marital and post marital counseling, officiating wedding, and funeral services and supervising youth group and worship team. He organized the leadership team for Sunday worship and youth worship on Saturdays. He also organized a Nepali leaders' retreat. He worked on Congregation and Pastoral Priorities, following the Mennonite Church USA's guidelines, to find out the need of the congregation for purposeful ministry. Olak and his wife Mona travelled frequently to Aurora, IL to reach out to the Nepalese community. One elderly woman believed in Christ and was baptized. At present, all family members, except for her son in-law, have become believers and joined Pastor Amos' newly planted church at St. Charles.

Pastor Olak participated in SENT conferences organized by Mennonite Mission Network and led breakout sessions talking about the multicultural ministry of LWCC and other church planting topics since 2016. He also received a grant award in support of the Healthy Family Initiative Project for the Nepalese community in Rogers Park, Chicago, from the Chicago Mennonite Learning Centre through LWCC. The project aimed for career and vocational development, and peace building in the community. Many Nepalese community members benefitted from the career development, conflict management, and Spiritual Discipline trainings. Pastor Olak was licensed to the ministry by Illinois Mennonite Conference in 2017.

Pastor Olak sensed a need for equipping leaders both within the congregation and as LWCC leaders and members kept moving away from Chicago to other states seeking affordable rental housing and home ownership, or to reunite with their family members. So he started a Bible study group every Monday evening and Leadership Training every Saturday twice a month to address this need. His ministry expanded as he worked at welcoming new people, equipping them, and with whoever moved, sending them with prayers and blessings, so they could engage in the church or ministry in the new place they move. Pastor Olak would call the local church

pastor and tell him/her about the moving member and his/her gifts that might be helpful for that community. In this way, the members could use their leadership gifts and continue to help the pastor and engage in the community. Some of members have planted churches, others are leading youth or children's ministry, and some have transitioned to worship teams in other states.

These members are still connected with LWCC and invite Pastor Olak to teach and preach. Thus, LWCC's ministry of equipping leaders is not in vain, though members move into other states. It enlarges the vision of building God's Kingdom more broadly. Because of this vision, Pastor Ran Limbu in Madison, WI became interested in joining the Illinois Mennonite Conference (IMC). Pastor Olak mentored him to get ministry credentials from IMC and to become a member of IMC in March 2019. Pastor Olak is supporting Pastor Ran's ministry regularly by visiting the church and teaching.

Currently, Pastor Olak is mentoring Bikash Shankhar in AMBS' Journey Leadership Training and leading Midwest Pastors and Leaders in leadership trainings virtually once a week on Thursday evenings. The Covid-19 pandemic has opened the opportunity for teaching in different Nepalese Churches virtually, apart from Olak's half-time salaried pastoral ministry in LWCC's Nepalese congregation. Olak's completion of his PhD studies in the field of Christian ethics has equipped him to impart a strong message of peace and justice. Since 2005, Pastor Olak has been teaching, preaching, equipping leaders, and expanding his outreach to people from different places and countries throughout Nepal, India, Bhutan, Hong Kong, United Kingdom and the USA. He continues his vision of training and equipping leaders to build the Church better and stronger to impart Christ's message of peace and justice. LWCC and IMC are blessed to support such a far-ranging vision for such a time as this.